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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000383

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS  
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TAGS: KIRF PHUM SCUL SOCI PREL LA

SUBJECT: SEVENTH DAY ADVENTISTS LOOKING TO EXPAND IN LAOS

Classified By: Patricia M. Haslach for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Seventh Day Adventists have had an active church in Laos since 1974. There are approximately 1,250 Adventists country-wide, with the largest concentration in Vientiane Municipality. With only one church structure, most Adventists in Laos meet in house churches. While the Adventists have not faced as many restrictions as other Protestant groups in Laos, primarily a function of their small size and negligible growth, they too cited an inability to legally import religious materials. Lao Adventists are supported by the Southeast Asia Union Mission (SAUM), which is based in Singapore and maintains a seminary college in Thailand. With SAUM's assistance, the Adventists plan to construct four new churches in Laos during the coming twelve months. End Summary.

Background: Lao Adventists

¶2. (SBU) On May 4 PolOff visited the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Vientiane and met with Mr. Bounprany Vannady, Director of Personal Ministry, and Mr. Phoumsaming Keovanna, Director of Communication and Education. The two explained that the first Adventist congregation in Laos began in Luang Namtha Province in 1957 following the visit of a U.S. missionary. In 1967, Adventists from the Philippines visited Vientiane and, in 1974, the first Adventist Church in Laos was established in Vientiane. This church, the only existing Adventist Church in Laos, has remained open since its construction in 1974. Some smaller Adventist churches that had been built in other provinces, however, were seized by the Government of Laos (GoL) following the regime change in ¶1975. (Note: The Seventh Day Adventists and the Lao Evangelical Church are the only two Protestant religious groups recognized by the GoL. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) Keovanna informed PolOff that there are currently 1,249 Adventists in Laos. While the largest concentration, approximately 600, is in Vientiane Municipality, there are Adventist congregations that meet in some 15 house churches in Bolikhamsay, Bokeo, Champassak, Luang Prabang, and Xieng Khouang provinces. He also noted that the Adventist Church in Vientiane is required to report its membership and other information to the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) on a monthly basis. (Note: The LFNC is a mass organization that oversees religious, social, and cultural issues. The LFNC requires frequent reporting from both Protestant groups -- the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) and the Adventists, occasional reporting from the Baha'i and Muslims (once every four to six months), and does not require such reports from the Buddhists. The Catholics report that, as of about five years ago, they too are no longer required to submit these reports. End Note.)

¶4. (C) Both Keovanna and Bounprany noted that the Adventists in Laos are supported by Southeast Asia Union Mission (SAUM),

a regional Adventist organization based in Singapore. Both church officials graduated from Mission College, a four-year seminary in Thailand that is funded by SAUM. SAUM has also funded their attendance at regular meetings in Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries. Both men plan to visit Adventist organizations in the United States in July, a trip that will be funded by SAUM. (Note: The Adventist Church maintains regular contact with SAUM's Mission College in Thailand. An American who works for Mission College was visiting the church at the time of PolOff's meeting. End Note.)

¶15. (C) Keovanna remarked that the church has tried to build a positive relationship with the GoL by providing "gifts" of equipment and supplies. On an annual basis, he estimated that the church spends approximately \$2,000 USD to fund items requested by the LFNC. Most recently, the LFNC requested that the Adventists provide \$50,000 USD for the construction of a school dormitory in Xieng Khouang Province. Keovanna said SAUM has provided the money for the project to the church but noted that the church has not yet provided funds to the GoL due to accountability issues. He told PolOff that the GoL wants the church to provide the money directly to provincial authorities while the church plans to pay for construction directly to ensure the money is used for its intended purpose.

#### Importing Religious Materials

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¶16. (C) Keovanna told PolOff that the Adventist Church has not been as restricted by the GoL as have some other Protestant groups. For example, he said it has been several years since an Adventist has been arrested for religious activities. However, he indicated that some problems do

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exist, the most significant being the inability of the Church to import religious materials. Because of import restrictions, he said the church generally tries to circumvent the GoL by importing Bibles illegally. GoL officials have at times, however, visited the Church and confiscated Bibles that were imported illegally. In the near future, he said, the Adventists plan to seek approval from the LFNC to print Bibles in China for import to Laos.

#### Expansion Plans

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¶17. (C) Keovanna and Bounprany told PolOff that Lao Adventists plan to build four new churches during the coming twelve months. The Adventists, however, have not yet requested GoL approval for construction of the churches. The SAUM has reportedly provided funding for the construction of one church in Bokeo Province, two in Bolikhamxay Province, and one in Champassak Province. Bounprany noted that the churches will be the first Adventist churches to be constructed in Laos since 1974.

#### Comment

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¶18. (C) Despite difficulties importing religious materials, the Adventists have generally been free to practice their beliefs. This is primarily due to the fact that the Adventists are few in number, have not experienced significant growth in the number of believers, have not yet requested permission to build new church structures, and have maintained a low profile. The fact that the Adventists now plan to build new churches, however, may result in increased attention by the GoL.

¶19. (C) While problems may result from efforts to build new churches, the Adventists have in recent years been able to maintain a relatively positive relationship with the GoL. Symbolic of the GoL's apparent acceptance, or at least tolerance, of the Adventists, in 2003 officials from the LFNC asked the Seventh Day Adventist Church to incorporate a Christian congregation in Xieng Khouang Province into its

community in order to bring its doctrines in line with those of an approved denomination. Leading up to this request, the Hmong Christian congregation had adopted millenarian practices as part of its worship services. According to provincial officials, these beliefs led a senior church member to kill his wife, predicting her resurrection in three days. Since being absorbed by the Adventists, the congregation has not had any apparent problems.

HASLACH